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AUTHOR Magrath, Douglas R.
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ABSTRACT

A curriculum model for teaching Arabic that closely follows the "Natural Approach" is outlined. The method stresses skill development through language use in a variety of realistic situations from the outset of the course. It differs from traditional approaches to Arabic instruction in its emphasis on the communication of meaningful messages rather than strict focus on grammar and translation. Sentence combining and problem solving within a specific context are preferred to repetition, drill, and rote memorization. Word-level decoding (sight words) and phonetic decoding are combined, using short, high-frequency words to teach the alphabet and written language. Computer-assisted exercises help students gain familiarity with the Arabic keyboard. The topical, interactive approach is found to be a useful way to teach formal written and spoken Arabic and to enhance communication skills. (MSE)

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ABSTRACT

A TOPICAL INTERACTIVE APPROACH TO ARABIC LANGUAGE LEARNING

1988,Douglas R. Magrath,Rhodes College

A curriculum model for teaching Arabic that closely follows the "Natural Approach" is possible with current and instructor-generated materials.This approach is now being used in modern foreign language and ESL (English as a second language) teaching as part of a methods revolution which stresses skill using and learning L2 by using L2. The author presents a curriculum model for Arabic that teaches vital skills and allows the use of the target language in a variety of realistic situations from the beginning of the course.

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A TOPICAL INTERACTIVE APPROACH TO ARABIC LANGUAGE LEARNING

This paper presents a curriculum model for teaching Arabic that closely follows the "Natural Approach" now being used in modern foreign language and ESL (English as a second language) teaching. This methods revolution which stresses skill using and learning L2 by using L2 has yet to affect the materials and methods of teaching Arabic. The traditional approaches and accompanying materials stress the form of language rather than the functions. The L2 learner needs a curriculum that teaches vital skills and allows the use of the target language in a variety of realistic situations from the beginning of the course. Suggestions will be offered for the development of a topical-interactive approach that is based on situations and semantic topics rather than purely a grammatical sequence. Currently available material will be discussed and a variety of applications of the new methodology will be examined.

THE NEED

The concepts of "communication skills" or "language functions" so common in the teaching of Modern languages and ESL seem to be lacking from Modern Standard Arabic materials. The typical text is sequenced by grammar;imperfect verbs (al-fi'lu al-mudari'), so necessary for interaction, are often left to the later lessons. (Lesson 13 in Abboud et al; Lesson 24 in Ziadeh and Winder;lesson 14 in Haywood and Nahmad) The student activities are centered around translation and repetitious drills, and proficiency remains an elusive goal. Dilworth Parkinson has commented on the teaching of Arabic:

> "Students whom we consider very advanced and who are quite good at getting through a reading passage may find they test out as novices (0's and 1's) because they honestly do have a lot of trouble asking directions or other information questions, telling about their lives or their families or their jobs, buying things or even having a political discussion."
> (Parkinson, 20-21)

Current textbooks do not address these problems since they do not take a functional approach to Modern Standard Arabic. These texts provide extensive exercises in reading, translation and in some cases structural drills; however they do not add skill-building and communicative exercises as do texts in ESL and other languages. Rather they are sequenced by grammatical points in a spiral approach based on order of difficulty or linguistic markedness. The rationale underlying this approach is that the learners are studying Arabic as a part of an area studies curriculum where proficiency is measured by translation skills rather than the ability to communicate a meaningful message.

MOVING FROM FORM TO FUNCTION

The "input hypothesis" offers an alternative approach to FL teaching that can be applied to Arabic. The focus is more on the learners and their interactions in L2 as they study the language

through skill using:

> "According to the input hypothesis,
> language acquisition can only take place
> when a message which is being transmitted is
> understood,i.e. when the focus is on what is
> being said rather than on the form of the message.
> this could be referred to as the "Great Paradox
> of Language Teaching": Language is best
> taught when it is being used to transmit
> messages, not when it is explicitly taught
> for conscious learning."(Krashen and Terrell,55)

Even beginners can start with a limited communication exercise since..."all learners come to a second language with knowledge of a first, and with understanding of communication strategies."Realistic L2 activities based on familiar topics help the learners master communication skills as well as the particular grammar point of the day. "The learner of a second language needs to learn the functions of language:how to make requests, apologize, ask for permission,etc. in the second language."(Larson-Freeman, 221) Both oral and written practice should contain "comprehensible input" designed to help the learners store the linguistic material in deep memory:

> "Second language material must
> build on what students
> know and what arouses their curiosity and
> interest at their age and in their circumstances,

if it is to be effectively integrated into stored experience."(Rivers and Melvin,186)

The conversational exchange shown in figure 1 illustrates the target material in a more realistic way than the traditional grammar-driven lessons found in the standard textbooks. Structures include equational sentences, adjectives, pronouns, Idafah and Wh-questions. The vocabulary includes derived verbal participles-MUMTAZ, MUWAZZAF-that may not be formally introduced until book 2, but the learners use them as chunks of meaningful language in communicative situations.

Verbs should be presented early in the course. In the LINGUAPHONE series imperfect forms are given in lesson 2 as shown in figure 2.

High frequency verbs and situations form the core of this lesson. Practical skills are addressed even though they may run ahead of the formal grammar. Humor is injected in the second dialogue on page 29, if the students laugh, they have assimilated the material.

GRAMMAR SKILLS

Grammar is still important, especially in a language like Arabic that differs so much from English. Repetition, translation and pattern drill do not effectively teach language although such activities may play a secondary role:

"Mimicry, memorization, and pattern practice do not "teach" language. They may sometimes be

> appropriate techniques for a variety of classroom needs but ae in general disfavor because of their mechanical (meaningless) nature, their overuse by teachers, and their tendency to be stilted and boring."(Haskell,119)

The following is a pattern drill provided in a recent Arabic text:

CHANGE TO THE PLURAL

1. An Egyptian Contractor
2. The skillful carpenter
3. A complete article.
4. A smart accountant
5. The president of the company.
6. The beautiful secretary took the empty folder
7. The manager wrote the important announcement.

(Smart,105)

The discrete items do not form a united block of language. Students may become skilled at doing drills but it is not meaningful language learning:

> "Rote learning can be effective on a short-term basis, but for any long-term retention it fails because of the tremendous buildup of interference. In those cases in which efficient long-term retention is obtained in rote- learning situations like those often found in the audiolingual method, it would appear that by sheer dogged determination, the learner has somehow

> subsumed the material meaningfully in spite of the method.(Brown,75)

A more effective approach than repetition and drill would borrow techniques from the highly successful field of ESL teaching where grammatical concepts are integrated into a functional context. Sentence combining that allows the learners to generate a meaningful text is one possibility. Figure 3 shows a sample exercise where sentences are in a meaningful context that teaches target culture as well as grammar. Sentences can be combined in different ways and more or less material can be offered depending upon the level of the class.

Sentence combining is a proven technique and should be used along with other functional exercises that integrate grammar and content. For example, a chart of useful information can be used as a starting point for discussion, structure, writing or reading. The trip chart in figure 4 is useful for teaching the days of the week, verbs (past, present or future forms) proper names, prepositions and more.

Rather than just memorizing a vocabulary list, translating or performing a pattern drill, the learners discuss a realistic activity and attempt to solve problems. Information missing from the chart must be provided. Where will the travelers stay? What will they do? High frequency useful verbs are used including the long verbs: SAAFARA RAKIBA, INTAZARA, WASALA etc. Perhaps weak "fa" verbs or form VIII have not been formally introduced yet, but they can still be used by language learners in the same way

that an international student studying ESL may use a V+ing in a meaningful sentence without having to analyze it.(i.e. a gerund:" I like swimming") Terminology should be meaningful and relevant to English speakers learning Arabic. English rather than Latin terms should be used. For example: possessive rather than genitive, object case rather than accusative, or even better, the Arabic terms can be introduced. Above all, grammar becomes more meaningful when taught in context. The following is a sample lesson from ESL introducing object pronouns:

> "At an American wedding ceremony, the groom enters first. The bride enters from the back. Usually the bride's father walks her down the aisle and takes her to the groom's side. During the ceremony, the groom takes the ring and places it on the bride's left hand....When the bride and groom leave, friends and relatives often throw rice at them.
> (Elbaum, 92)

This passage is followed by exercises that review both the content and the grammatical focus. Underlined words are replaced with pronouns:

1. Does the bride enter with the GROOM?
2. Does the groom put THE RING on the bride's right hand ?

.....

Further exercises ask personal questions requiring the learners to communicate a limited real message:

1. Does the teacher understand YOU ?
2. Does the teacher speak YOUR LANGUAGE ?

.....

1.How often do you see THE TEACHER ?
2.How often do you clean YOUR OVEN ?

.....

(p. 93-94)

These exercises allow creative input from the students and are much more practical than mere transformational drills or translations. The short reading passage at the beginning is not translated, however helps are given for difficult or culture-bound words.

THE ALPHABET

An approach combining word level decoding (sight words) and phonetic decoding has been used successfully by the author in teaching Arabic at both the college and high school level. This technique works well in teaching ESL literacy to immigrants and can readily be adapted to teaching non-Latin alphabets.(Magrath, 1988) The consensus among ESL professionals is that both methods combined work best:

> "There is no conclusive evidence that either the Whole Word or the Linguistic Method works best with all students. Nor is there

> any assurance that when reading, a student will practice only one or the other exclusively... the average ESL learner just beginning to read ESL decodes spelling patterns, recognizes whole words, guesses from context and makes predictions."(Bowen, Madsen,Hilferty,224)

A mixed holistic approach to the alphabet makes sense in the case of Arabic where short high frequency real words can be used to start the students communicating via the written system.Useful sight words are pronouns, familiar terms such as "Taalib", 'Ustadh", "Baab" etc. Exercises on both the individual symbol and word level include same-different discrimination, fill in the blank and dialogue completion. Computer assisted exercises at this stage allow the learners to type in the answers and gain familiarity with the Arabic keyboard.

These examples show how a functional approach can be used with Arabic. It has worked well in the author's classes as the following student comments on the computer-generated handouts indicate:

" I like the idea of having a dialogue and then having questions on the dialogue. In other language classes, the questions can be copied directly from the dialogue, but not with these. Therefore we are challenged from the start."(J.L.)

"I think the handouts are good because they are about everyday situations and are fun to read." (L.H.)

A topical-interactive approach works with Arabic. Formal Arabic, both written and spoken, is a valid means of communication and can be presented in a modern way that enhances communicative skills.

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FIGURE 1

These following passage from a new Arabic conversation and reading text illustrates the application of these principles since it has broken away somewhat from the old methodology.(Baccouche and Azmi, 1985,pp. 45-46)

نادية : من هذه يا زينب ؟

زينب : هذه صفيّة ، هي طالبة جديدة هنا

نادية : و أنت طالبة جديدة أيضا ؟

نوال : لا أنا أستاذة هندسة هنا

نادية : أنت أستاذة سهلة ؟

صفيّة : هي أستاذة ممتازة

نوال : هل أنت طالبة يا نادية ؟

نادية : لا، أنا موظّفة

نوال : أين؟

نادية : في مكتب شركة طيران

نوال :أيُّ شركة طيران ؟

نادية : شركة طيران مصر

FIGURE 2

(Mansour and Majalli,DURUUS FI AL-'ARABIYYA,p.29)

أنا أسكُن في بيت بالقاهرة . في البيت طابق علويٌّ وطابق سفليٌّ
غُرف النّوم في الطّابق العلويّ . في الطّابق السّفليّ غرفة الجلوس ،
وغرفة المكتب وغُرفة الأكل . نحن نجلس في غُرفة الجلوس ، ونأكل في
غرفة الأكل و نقرأ و نكتُب وندرُس في غرفة المكتب ...(ص. ٢٧)

FIGURE 3

The students read the sample then rewrite it by combining sentences. A sample answer immediately follows the model:

زرتُ أحمد . يسكن في القاهرة . القاهرة أكبر مدينة في مصر . أخذني إلى حديقة الحيوانات . أخذني إلى المتحف الوطني . هو متحف مشهور

زرتُ أحمد الّذي يسكن في القاهرة ، أكبر مدينة في مصر فأخذني إلى حديقة الحيوانات وبعد ذلك إلى المتحف الوطني المشهور

FIGURE 4

This trip chart serves as a catalyst for in class conversation using verbs and place and time expressions. It can also act as a prompt for the students to write:

Sunday 3 October	Arrival to Algiers. (7pm)
Monday 4 October	Tour of the capital, Visit museums and historical sites.
Tuesday 5 October	Trip to the Sahara.
Wednesday 6 October	Tour of the city, Wahran
Thursday 7 October	Visit Constantina
Friday 8 October	Return to Algiers. Travel to Cairo.

(Majalli and Mansour, 90)

The trip chart is given in the text without any accompanying exercises. Using the principles discussed above, the instructor can devise various activities around the given information. For example:

Write a description of your tour:

1. On Sunday, October 3, we arrived at Algiers airport. We began our tour the next day.....
   .....
   .....